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ABSTRACT

The Educational Testing Service (ETS) is beginning a comprehensive longitudinal study of the cognitive, personal, and social development of disadvantaged children from age 3 to grade 3. ETS hopes to identify the antecedents of favorable intellectual and social development and to suggest what kinds of educational programs might help to bridge the gap between the disadvantaged and the more affluent. The study will involve 9 groups of children in 23 elementary school districts in New Jersey, Alabama, Missouri, and Oregon. Some of the principal features of the study design are that: (1) the groups will be "natural" rather than "contrived," i.e. parents will decide about their children's participation in Head Start or kindergarten in the ordinary way; (2) the subjects will be English-speaking Negro and white children; (3) where possible, ETS selected districts that were mixed by race and socioeconomic status; and (4) cross-sectional comparison groups were included to provide baseline data. Data will be collected from measures of the family, measures of the child's physical, perceptual, cognitive, and personal-social development, and measures of the classroom, teacher, school, and community. Interviews, observation techniques, medical examinations, questionnaires, and tests will be used to collect data. Cooperation from parents, schools and Head Start program personnel is actively being sought by ETS. (MH)

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The ETS-OEO Longitudinal Study of Disadvantaged Children

Educational Testing Service (ETS), under the auspices of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), is embarking on a comprehensive study of the cognitive, personal, and social development of disadvantaged children over the crucial period from age 3 to grade 3. In general terms, one aim of the study is to identify the components of early education that are associated with children's development to determine the environmental and background factors that influence such associations, and, if possible, to describe how these influences operate. We hope to be able, eventually, to suggest what kinds of programs educational institutions might consider to bridge the gap between the disadvantaged and the more affluent, and to provide other information useful to community and federal planning agencies involved in problems of the poor. The primary objective of the study is to provide the first in-depth, longitudinal information on the psychosocial development of young children from low-income families. In many ways, Head Start is a social experiment, a set of manipulations and interventions being carried out on a grand scale with a wide array of socioculturally disadvantaged children and families. It is grounded in theory and accumulated knowledge about the human development process, the educative process, and social and community organization. Head Start's goals and objectives (in terms of betterment of the conditions of early physical, intellectual, personal, and social development of socioeconomically limited children) have been defined clearly from its very inception in the White House Conference on the Disadvantaged in 1964, and its establishment as a part of the Office of Economic Opportunity in 1965. However, it is not a conventional cut-and-dried social action program in the sense that Head Start has never selected one specific set of methods or procedures as the singly prescribed means of achieving these objectives. Quite intentionally, Head Start has chosen to offer only general directives and suggested alternatives of guidelines for developing local programs.

Because Head Start itself is a social experiment in early childhood education, it is a particularly appropriate vehicle for advancing the theory and knowledge from which it developed. Head Start's value as a social experiment rests solidly on the quality of evaluative data gained as the experiment is carried out. Such data, in turn, will answer basic research questions about early educational experiences. Thus, evaluation and research can be the same thing in this endeavor. For Educational Testing Service, the longitudinal study is primarily a piece of research; for Head Start and the Office of Economic Opportunity, it is an evaluation exercise. But the objectives for both parties will be served well by the study as it has been planned.

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Design of the Study

The ETS study involves 9 groups of children in 23 elementary school sending districts in 4 geographical locations: Trenton, New Jersey; Lee County, Alabama; St. Louis, Missouri and Portland, Oregon. The locations are 3 cities varying in size, stability of the population, and degree of organization of the Negro community, and one rural-small town area in the South. All of the locations have Head Start available but the general outlines of the programs vary, reflecting the structural and curriculum differences of programs around the country.

To obtain the major subjects of the study, the 2,000 children in group 1-ETS entered the designated school districts in winter of 1968, knocked on doors, and tried to locate every child who would be eligible to enter the first grade in the fall of 1971. Participation by these children in the study was dependent on parental permission and cooperation. The cross-sectional comparison groups will be chosen from the same locations with the cooperation of local school and Head Start authorities. To summarize the principal features of the study design:

- the plan relies upon "natural" rather than "contrived" groups - parent decisions about sending or not sending children to Head Start or kindergarten will be made in the ordinary way.

- the study subjects will be Negro or White children from English-speaking backgrounds. For feasibility reasons, ETS did not wish to add the complications and numbers which the inclusion of Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, American Indian, and other special subgroups would entail. It is hoped that comparable studies of these children can be undertaken in the future.

- where possible, ETS selected racially mixed school districts and made a point of including at least one district in each location where there was substantial variability in socioeconomic status. To the extent possible, ETS tried to insure that race and SES are not complete confounded.

- cross-sectional comparison groups are viewed as an important design addition, as they provide a source of baseline data against which to interpret longitudinal results. Comparisons should be especially relevant in communities experiencing major social changes or upheavals during the course of the study and with respect to the cumulative effects of compensatory education. Other comparison groups will permit a study of the effects on children's development of the assessment procedures themselves and will permit ETS to gauge the cumulative effects of different amounts of assessment over the period of the study.

Measures

Data in 9 measures will be collected; measures of the family; measures of the child's physical, perceptual, cognitive, and personal-social development; and measures of the classroom, teacher, school, and community.

The choices of what measures to emphasize and use are based on a number of considerations. To mention a few:

- the questions toward which the study is directed require repeated measures of related phenomena over time. We may choose to measure exactly the same kind of thing over time - for example, breadth of vocabulary and goal directedness from age 3 through grade 3. Or we may measure characteristics that are thought to be percursors of later abilities of interest - visual and auditory perception at age 3, 4, and 5 and reading ability at grades 1, 2, and 3.

- although the study will not overlook the usual demographic and static variables of home and classroom (things like family income, teacher's years of experience), we want to place extraordinary emphasis on process variables (for example, teacher-child interactions). These are the areas in which we think there will be payoff.

- the criterion measures of the study will encompass both the objectives that preschool and primary programs claim for themselves and aspects of development that society and social science theory hold as important in the broader area of human functioning.

- to the extent possible, ETS shall get multiple sources of information about a phenomenon - for example, from tests and from observations.

- for many of the measurements, ETS shall give preference to unobtrusive and nonreactive measures - for example, observations of children's behavior in natural settings.

At present, the following approach to measurement is being developed:

Family, status and process - To be obtained from interviews and observation of parent-child interaction for children in group 1 at the time of identification and annually throughout the study. Family interviews will also be carried out for children who move away from the study locations.

Physical - to be obtained from medical examinations for children in group 1 at the time of identification and periodically throughout the study. Such medical information as available from preschool and school records will be obtained for children in the comparison groups.

Perceptual, cognitive - To be obtained through tests for children in group 1 at the time of identification and annually throughout the study, and for children in all other groups annually or as long as they are in the study. Teacher and parent ratings of cognitive development will also be obtained where appropriate.

Personal-social - To be obtained from observations from free-play situations once children are in preschool, from test-like situations where appropriate, and from ratings by testers and teachers for all groups. Parents will also be asked to make ratings of children.

Classroom program and climate - To be obtained from detailed observation of teachers and children in the classroom, from global ratings by observers, and from teacher descriptions for all preschool and school classes attended by children.

Teacher, background attitudes, abilities, goals - To be obtained through questionnaires for all teachers every year they are involved with children in the study. For children who move away, every attempt will be made to involve their teachers in providing this information.

School, climate and structure - To be obtained from observations and from questionnaires completed by teachers and administrators. In addition, parents of children will be asked annually to give their attitudes toward the schools and classes their children are in.

Community - To be monitored by local observers throughout the course of the study. Parents will also be asked about their perceptions of the community and their access to its power structure and facilities.

In almost all of these areas, ETS will be breaking new ground in developing measures that can be reliably used on a national scale. Instrumentation problems have been one of the limiting "state of the art" factors in advancing our knowledge of early child development and of social action programs. It would be overly optimistic to expect that the ETS longitudinal study can solve these problems entirely and complete the study, too. One of the important by-products of the ETS effort may be, however, the development of a core of measures that have been darefully prepared to be sensitive to the nuances of the child, his family milieu and his school experiences.

The ETS Study in the Communities

Reference has been made to parent permission and school cooperation. But in a study of this sort concern with parent, teacher, school, and community relations is of far more than passing significance. It is the key to whether the study ever gets started and, once started, gets done. In particular, many residents and teachers in poor or black areas are tired of the clipboarded researchers who cavalierly invade their lives, are suspicious of research completely planned and controlled by those outside the community and the culture, and are impatient with the lack of returns to the community.

ETS has accepted the notion that they can get past community reservations and conduct research in such areas but has accepted also a special obligation to make the research as relevant as possible. Some of ETS's steps in this direction include provisions for getting advice on measurement content and procedures from people in the study communities; having people on the central project staff who have lived or worked in similar communities; pretesting procedures in similar communities (and with similar children, parents, and teachers); mounting an intensive public information program about the study in each area; "feeding back" relevant information to parents, school people, and others during the course of the study; and recruiting, training, and paying local personnel to carry out most of the operations required.

ETS's success to date in recruiting and training paraprofessionals to obtain reliable scientific data has been one of more exciting aspects of this study. ETS has been observing and testing in the four communities since April 1969. In each of the four communities a local coordinator is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the study. During the seven years of the study, these coordinators will bear the primary responsibility for interpreting the study to the community and the needs of the community to ETS and OEO. The study is ambitious; it is the largest study of its kind that has been funded for the study of psychological development. It is likely that in some ways the study will not reach the many objectives set for it, that there will be both expected and unexpected difficulties along the way, and that the understanding cooperation of local, state, and regional Head Start personnel will be needed indeed.

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There is, however, a clear social need for sound data to plan the rapidly expanding range of massive federal involvement in early child development and services to children and families in several agencies of the Government. Furthermore, the basic scientific information gained here may facilitate our understanding of the general process of early child development. We may learn a great deal about the integration of intellectual, motivational, emotional, and interpersonal aspects of the child in his overall pattern of development. We may learn more about the characteristics of a hitherto little-recognized segment of our population who live their lives outside the mainstream of middle-class America, insulated from great segments of our culture. And we may learn more about the educational process itself, about its component elements, and why it works - or fails to work.

From Head Start's point of view, the longitudinal study must be seen in perspective as but one of many large endeavors to evaluate Head Start as a federal social action program. In other studies we will focus on other facets of Head Start, we may have better opportunities for more comprehensive description of program or population variations, and we may have access to more representative samples. Although the ETS longitudinal study is potentially the most significant single piece of educational research undertaken in this decade, it must certainly be accompanied and followed by other equally ambitious efforts if we are eventually to meet our urgent social needs for sound educational theory and practice.